

Responses To Threat: Freeze, Appease, Flight, Fight

Our bodies and minds are adapted to **respond automatically to threatening events** – similar to how other animals respond to danger. We can think of this as our “programming” — built-in responses that are designed to protect us from harm. These reactions can occur quickly and automatically: *thinking* and *choosing* can be slow whereas *reacting instinctively* can save your life.

It is not your fault if you respond in any of these ways: **these responses are typical of people who are threatened and making the best of a bad situation** — not someone who is making calm, relaxed, free choices.

Freeze



Why is **freezing** a helpful response to a threatening situation?

- ✓ Early stages of the trauma: Gives us time to evaluate a situation, makes us less noticeable
- ✓ Later on: If it is not possible to escape or win, then becoming unresponsive might be the best chance for survival

What happens in the body and mind?



(Early on) Thinking becomes quicker



(Early on) Attention is focused on escape routes



(Later on) Dissociation:

- “Out of body” experiences
- Emotions become numb
- Unable to move

Appease



Why is **appeasing** a helpful response to a threatening situation?

- ✓ If the treat is another person (or people) then giving them what they want, placating them, begging, or submitting can reduce the danger... even if we say or do things that we later regret

What happens in the body and mind?



Your mind focuses on options that might reduce the immediate threat



You might not “see” other options that seem obvious later



Adopt a submissive body posture:

- Body cringes to appear smaller
- Head bowed, eyes averted

Flight



Why is it helpful to **escape** from a threatening situation?

- ✓ A successful escape can mean survival, often with fewer costs than other options

What happens in the body and mind?



Body prepares for physical activity by:

- Releasing adrenaline
- Increasing heart rate
- Speeding up breathing rate
- Tensing muscles



Thinking becomes quicker



Attention is focused on escape routes

Fight



Why can **fighting** be a helpful response to a threatening situation?

- ✗ Fighting comes with risks of injury, death or other consequences
- ✓ ... but winning increases our chances of survival
- ✓ Sometimes looking aggressive can be enough to make an opponent back down

What happens in the body and mind?



Body prepares for physical activity by:

- Releasing adrenaline
- Increasing heart rate
- Speeding up breathing rate
- Tensing muscles



Focus of attention is restricted. Focus on danger, opportunities to win or to escape